



Sacred Heart
UNIVERSITY

Sacred Heart University
DigitalCommons@SHU

Government Faculty Publications

Government

11-2004

Nietzsche on Truth and The Will

Steven Michels

Sacred Heart University, michelss@sacredheart.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/gov_fac



Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Michels, S. (2004). Nietzsche on truth and the will. *Minerva, An Internet Journal of Philosophy*, 8, 34-61. Retrieved from: <http://www.minerva.mic.ul.ie/vol8/index.html>

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Government at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Government Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu, lysobeyb@sacredheart.edu.

NIETZSCHE ON TRUTH AND THE WILL

Steven Michels

Abstract

The fundamental — and many would say lingering — challenge to Nietzsche concerns how he can ground the will to power, given what he says about metaphysics as a philosophic prejudice. Does his teaching not topple of its own weight/lessness? It is the standard objection to which all postmodern philosophers must respond. This article examines what Nietzsche says about the limits of truth and the role that experience and perspective have in setting standards by which we might live correctly. The will to power, Nietzsche instructs, is a claim on truth, confirmed only to the extent that it serves life and culture. Hence Nietzsche's most basic doctrine appears in nature as a source of order and value, without imposing itself as such.

This world is the will to power — and nothing besides! And you yourselves are also this will to power — and nothing besides!
(Nietzsche 1968, §1067)

Although the centrality of the will to power to Nietzsche's philosophy is nearly undisputed, what remains contentious is how Nietzsche can defend the will to power in a manner consistent with his break from Western rationalism. As Linda L. Williams summarizes the tension: "ultimately...a wholly univocal answer to the question 'What is will to power?' is not only impossible but also undesirable" (2001, p. x). She concludes, "interpreting will to power as Nietzsche's empirical principle to which all experience can be reduced or interpreting will to power as Nietzsche's science have the benefit of being in this world, but in my view they suffer from the implication that will to power somehow transcends Nietzsche's perspectivism" (2001, p. 129).

Does Nietzsche, as Williams suggests, present an ambiguous or incongruous philosophy? Or does he, as Heidegger charges, relapse into metaphysics? Is the will to power a force for order or does it exemplify the chaos of the modern age? This article examines how, through his emphasis on perspectivism and life as the standard for truth, Nietzsche is able to use the will to power as the basis for his positive thought, while avoiding what he would call standard metaphysical trappings.

The Problem of the Will

The concept of the will came to Nietzsche through his reading of Schopenhauer. In his magnum opus, *The World as Will and Idea*, Schopenhauer argues that individuals, as conscious and reflective beings, interpret the world. This notion is established *a priori*, for “no truth is more certain, more independent of all the others, and less in need of proof, than this: that all that is there for the knowing — that is, the whole world — is only object in relation to the subject, perception of the perceiver — in a word, idea” (Schopenhauer 1995, Bk. 1 §1).

Insofar as the world is subjective, or the subject of its perceiver, the world is also will. Schopenhauer claims: “the world as idea is a mirror which reflects the will. In this mirror the will recognizes itself in ascending grades of distinctness and completeness, the highest of which is man, whose nature, however, receives its complete expression only through the integrated series of his actions” (Schopenhauer 1995, Bk. 4 §54). This

combination of idea and will is the only logical, and indeed the only possible, ground for philosophy. “A reality that is neither of these two,” Schopenhauer writes, “is the absurd product of a dream, and its credence in philosophy is a treacherous will-o’-the wisp” (Schopenhauer 1995, Bk. 1 §1).

Although Nietzsche followed Schopenhauer in using the will as the foundation for his philosophy, he broke with his teacher in a radical way. As Bryan Magee writes, “Nietzsche’s philosophy developed in such a way as to retain Schopenhauer’s insistence on the primacy of the will as its cardinal point, but to adopt an attitude towards the will which was the diametrical opposite of Schopenhauer’s” (1983, p. 269). Schopenhauer, Nietzsche explains, thought the will was “really known to us, absolutely and completely known” (Nietzsche 1966, §19). Nietzsche professes that the will is not known absolutely, nor can it be. The act of willing is not even a single entity; it is “a unity only as a word” (Nietzsche 1966, §19). Against Schopenhauer, Nietzsche posits the will as something “complicated” (Nietzsche 1966, §19). Nietzsche claims that Schopenhauer, like many philosophers, misunderstood the function of the will. Schopenhauer did not really know of the will: he merely accepted what others said of it and then expounded upon their view. Nietzsche tells us that, unlike Schopenhauer, he will be “cautious” and “*unphilosophisch*” (Nietzsche 1966, §19); much like the will itself, his treatment is “complicated.”

In his most succinct formulation, Nietzsche calls the will to power the “essence of life” (Nietzsche 1989b, §2.12; Cf. 1968, §254). Nietzsche suggests that the will is central to man’s existence: without it we would die. That, however, tells us nothing about its operation, only its importance. The same can be said of water, for example (see Nietzsche 1998, §3). Is the will physical or psychological? What does it mean for a political community? In a sense, the will as “essence” is not so much a definition as it is a standard for judgment, a challenge to consider and perhaps accept Nietzsche’s philosophy as our own. Perhaps Nietzsche wishes to assess the composition of our will, to test his audience. *If not the will, what is our essence?*

Although Nietzsche’s treatment of the will is far from simple, one thing is certain: by no means does the will to power mean the instinct for self-preservation. “Physiologists should think before putting down the instinct of self-preservation as the cardinal instinct of an organic being,” Nietzsche charges. “A living thing seeks above all to *discharge* its strength — life itself is *will to power*; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent *results*” (Nietzsche 1966, §13). If anything, the drive for self-preservation is a sign of a weak will (Nietzsche 1974, §349). The strong and healthy have no need to concern themselves with preservation; it is the weak and fearful who must always pursue such an ignoble aim. The confusion of the will with self-preservation is merely one among many “*superfluous* teleological principles” common in modern philosophic discourse. Nietzsche’s new philosophy breaks with this tradition, and instead demands an “economy of principles” (Nietzsche 1966, §13).

Arguably, Nietzsche's clearest, if not most comprehensive, statement on the will is found in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Nietzsche begins his instruction in Section 19, where he writes: "in all willing there is, first, a plurality of sensations, namely, the sensation of the state 'away from which,' the sensation of the state 'towards which,' the sensations of this 'from' and 'towards' themselves, and then also an accompanying muscular sensation, which, even without our putting into motion 'arms and legs,' begins its action by force of habit as soon as we 'will' anything" (Nietzsche 1966, §19). As Nietzsche describes it, "we are at the same time the commanding *and* the obeying parties, and as the obeying party we know the sensations of constraint, impulsion, pressure, resistance, and motion, which usually begin immediately after the act of the will" (Nietzsche 1966, §19). Many, like Schopenhauer, disregard this distinction and replace it with a specific and definite will that corresponds to the "synthetic concept 'I'" (Nietzsche 1966, §19). For Nietzsche, however, activity itself is the only consideration; the "doer is merely a fiction added to the deed" (Nietzsche 1989b, §1.13). Both science and the "popular mind" suffer from "the misleading influence of language" and their attention to the "subject" (Nietzsche 1989b, §1.13). In other words, treating the will as if it were absolute neglects its true nature and its actual effects. This was Schopenhauer's error. Not only did he adopt the will from popular opinion, but he also treated a subjective precept as an objective fact.

Although he breaks from Schopenhauer's singular will known "absolutely and completely," Nietzsche considers "all willing" more alike than not. The will may be a

“unity only as a word,”¹ but willing is always comprised of the same essential features: it contains a “plurality” of sensations that, when conflicted, must be reconciled. These “sensations” are those of affirmation or negation — the “*away from which...*[and the] *towards which*” — and they require a point of reference (Nietzsche 1966, §19). Willing demands recognition of the present and future, a condition of being and a desire to effect any change that occurs. The plurality of the will means a plurality of wills.

For Nietzsche, willing means “willing an end” (Nietzsche 1968, §260). In this sense, the will is psychological, one instance of appetite or aversion. It is also physical in that we need to move our bodies in accordance with the sensation. The physical follows the psychological through “force of habit,” where every movement is directed by an act of the will (Nietzsche 1966, §19). Because the will necessarily contains an action or movement, it is impossible to will and not to act, a notion resembling what Hobbes had argued. Similarly, it is not possible to act, or to move, and not to will. Although the will should not be confused with the drive for self-preservation, will as “essence” implies that life is action, without which our lives would be left to chance (Nietzsche 1968, §673). Without the will, we would be as good as dead. Not surprisingly, Nietzsche alleges: “biologically, modern man represents a *contradiction of values*; he sits between two chairs, he says Yes and No in the same breath” (Nietzsche 1967b, Epilogue). Modern man is deficient not only in his understanding of the will, but in the action related to its full and healthy operation.

Perhaps the most important element of the will, or at least the one most overlooked, pertains to the *consequences* of willing. “What is strangest about the will,” Nietzsche observes, is that “he who wills believes sincerely that willing *suffices* for action” (Nietzsche 1966, §19). The result, Nietzsche insists, is the atrophy of the will. Since the will is used most often in times where obedience is a foregone conclusion, the full strength of the will is never realized or quickly forgotten. The plurality of sensations becomes the totality of the will. Since success is nevertheless equated with a demonstration of power, it goes unnoticed that the consequences are most likely the result of someone else’s will or just good fortune. In such instances, the will does not command; it merely predicts. The will is no longer a will to power, but a will to hope. It is far better, Nietzsche suggests, to fail on our own account, not to command, than to confuse someone else’s successes with our will. Although the perception of power may be similar, the actual amount of power, most evident in future acts of willing, is diminished significantly. Hence “human nature finds it harder to endure a victory than a defeat; indeed, it seems to be easier to achieve victory than to endure it in such a way that it does not in fact turn into a defeat” (Nietzsche 1997b, §1). In this sense, victory is a greater test of the will. In either event, the will is more than a series of sensations and thoughts: it is foremost an instance of command. An act of the will is predicated on: “the inward certainty that obedience will be rendered — and whatever else belongs to the position of the commander. A man who wills commands something within himself that renders obedience, or that he believes renders obedience” (Nietzsche 1966, §19). As Nietzsche tells it, “one is a cause oneself only when one knows that one has performed an

act of will” (Nietzsche 1968, §136). Life is fundamentally the will to power, the doctrine that “every power draws its ultimate consequences at every moment” (Nietzsche 1966, §22).

The extreme form of this doctrine, however, is the belief that the will is totally free, “the hundred-times-refuted theory of a ‘free will’” (Nietzsche 1966, §18). “Extravagant pride” has led man to believe that he is an autonomous creature, that his will is entirely free. This view, “the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one’s actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society[,] involves nothing less than to be precisely this *causa sui* and...to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of a swamp of nothingness” (Nietzsche 1966, §21). Nietzsche challenges the absurdity of this position by presenting the opposite (and equally problematic) claim, that the will is not “free” at all.

This “unfreedom of the will” is held in two different ways. The first is to accept without question the responsibility for all actions, regardless of their cause. Nietzsche claims that this view is held mainly by “vain races” (Nietzsche 1966, §21). “Others,” Nietzsche continues, “do not wish to be answerable for anything, or blamed for anything, and owing to an inward self-contempt, seek to *lay the blame for themselves somewhere else*” (Nietzsche 1966, §21). In both instances the will is either given credit for everything or denied blame for anything. Both positions, Nietzsche argues, are examples of the “misuse of cause and effect” (Nietzsche 1966, §21). “The ‘unfree will’ is mythology,” Nietzsche

concludes. “In real life it is only a matter of *strong* and *weak* wills” (Nietzsche 1966, §21). Lest we forget into which category we fall, Nietzsche reminds us: “Today the taste of the time and the virtue of the time weakens and thins down the will; nothing is as timely as weakness of the will” (Nietzsche 1966, §212).

These errors of the will manifest themselves in politics as well. Political men often confuse their will with successes that occur during their watch; they too profess a sort of “freedom of the will” (Nietzsche 1968, §136). Nietzsche ends the section sarcastically by declaring that a philosopher should “claim the right to include willing as such within the sphere of morals” (Nietzsche 1966, §19). Simply put, if everyone — including and especially rulers — thinks himself “free” to exercise his will and satisfy desires, why has no one seized the opportunity to rule? Nietzsche’s implicit claim is that philosophers are among those claiming “freedom of the will,” that they too wish to be ruled; hence it is no wonder that the will has gone unappreciated.

Your Truth or Your Life

The first mention of the will in *Beyond Good and Evil* occurs in the first section as “the will to truth.” Although the book opens in a philosophic tone, Nietzsche seeks to determine the value of what heretofore has been philosophy’s will. He begins by questioning why truth has been so venerated by philosophers: “*What* in us really wants ‘truth’?” he asks. “*Why not rather* untruth? and uncertainty? even ignorance?” (Nietzsche

1966, §1). What are the forces behind the moral turn in philosophy? In this formulation, truth is not *a* solution; it is *the* problem.

Nietzsche's answer is that the "drive to knowledge" is not and has never been the "father of philosophy" (Nietzsche 1966, §6). Philosophy, he contends, is not simply the pursuit of truth. The reality is more insidious: "anyone who considers the basic drives of man...will find that all of them have done philosophy at some time — and that every single one of them would like only too well to represent just *itself* as the ultimate purpose of existence and legitimate *master* of all the other drives. For every drive wants to be master — and it attempts to philosophize in *that spirit*" (Nietzsche 1966, §6). Thus, for Nietzsche, philosophy is not the will to truth; it is a manifestation of the will to power. Philosophers — "wily spokesman for their prejudices which they baptize 'truths'" (Nietzsche 1966, §5) — are neither honest nor courageous in that they do not speak to, much less admit, the true nature of their actions, even when they are aware of what they are doing. "Truths" are nothing more than our "*irrefutable* errors," Nietzsche claims (Nietzsche 1974, §265). "The essence of a thing is only an *opinion* about the 'thing,'" he writes (Nietzsche 1968, §556). In sum, "all valuations are only consequences and narrow perspectives in the service of this one will: valuation itself is only this will to power" (Nietzsche 1968, §675).

Nietzsche directed his assault on truth against Plato's metaphysics, the standard-bearer of the will to truth, and Kant, Plato's heir apparent. In light of Nietzsche's teaching on the

will to power, philosophy's metaphysical claims come to the fore as a construction of the will. "As soon as any philosophy begins to believe in itself," Nietzsche contends, "it always creates the world in its own image; it cannot do otherwise. Philosophy is this tyrannical drive itself, the most spiritual will to power, to the 'creation of the world,' to the *causa prima*" (Nietzsche 1966, §9). Hence previous philosophers are not truly philosophers; they have loved *their* truths, but not truth as such. "Plato, as the artist he was, preferred appearance to being!" Nietzsche writes. "Lie and invention to truth! the unreal to the actual! But he was so convinced of the value of appearance that he gave it the attributes 'being,' 'causality' and 'goodness,' and 'truth,' in short everything men value" (Nietzsche 1968, §572). Not only is Plato's philosophy his creation, but he used it for his own political purposes. Nietzsche sees the *eide* not as universal truth, but as Plato's will to power.²

As a result, Nietzsche deems the ancient quarrel between the poets and the philosophers as a sham: Socrates and Plato were poets, too — poets clever enough to mask their faulty moralism and self-serving politics. It is no wonder that Plato kept a copy of Aristophanes "under the pillow of his deathbed.... How could even Plato have endured life — a Greek life he repudiated — without an Aristophanes?" (Nietzsche 1966, §28). In Nietzsche's estimation, Socrates and Plato have lost their moral authority to speak on behalf of the good and the just: their ruse has been found out. "That is *all over* now," he might say to them (Nietzsche 1974, §357). Platonic philosophy is the cause of the modern dilemma. If Socrates is a decadent, then Nietzsche wishes to be "the *opposite* of a decadent"

(Nietzsche 1989a, Wise §2). Nietzsche's aim is to rid philosophy of masks and release man's natural creative energies.

The same is true of religious figures. Paul, we should recall, appears in Nietzsche's writings not only as a political actor, but as "the greatest of all apostles of vengeance" (Nietzsche 1982a, §45). We note, however, that while Nietzsche is hostile to Christianity, he is unexpectedly sympathetic to Jesus. In Nietzsche's estimation, youth almost always excuses ignorance (Nietzsche 1982b, 'Death'). What is more, Jesus' teachings, as Nietzsche tells it, were much different from what is now preached in his name. Nietzsche believes that Christianity was founded as a break from the teachings of Jesus; it was Paul who distorted what Jesus had said and made Christianity the religion that it is today. If Paul, the true founder of Christianity, did for Jesus what Plato did for Socrates, it is no wonder that Nietzsche does not want any followers (Nietzsche 1989a, Destiny §1).

The problem, Nietzsche contends, is that metaphysical philosophers, and with them religious thinkers, do not take their bearings from nature, properly understood. Most contemplative individuals are animated by concerns for a world and a life different from the one in which we find ourselves, and as a result, "philosophy, religion, and morality are *symptoms of decadence*" (Nietzsche 1968, §586C).

Although it is relatively new, the belief in metaphysics, Nietzsche argues, has already produced disastrous results: "That for thousands of years European thinkers thought

merely in order to prove something — today, conversely, we suspect every thinker who ‘wants to prove something’ — that the conclusions that *ought* to be the result of their most rigorous reflection were always settled from the start...this tyranny, this caprice, this rigorous and grandiose stupidity had *educated* the spirit” (Nietzsche 1966, §188). Metaphysics has made the philosophic endeavor one-dimensional, casting even non-metaphysical philosophy in an all too metaphysical light.

Nietzsche counsels us that the metaphysical posture of philosophy is not as old as its practitioners allege: “it was only very late that truth emerged — as the weakest form of knowledge” (Nietzsche 1974, §110). Truth as an end, as the standard for judgment, is a recent, and therefore uncertain, phenomenon. It is problematic, Nietzsche charges, in that it is potentially at odds with human nature: “It seemed that one was unable to live with [truth]: our organism was prepared for the opposite; all its higher functions, sense perception and every kind of sensation worked with those basic errors which had been incorporated since time immemorial” (Nietzsche 1974, §110). If living without truth demanded strength, then the demand for truth has made man weak. “It is more comfortable to obey than to examine,” Nietzsche laments (Nietzsche 1968, §452). Metaphysics is an emotional crutch, supporting the fragile modern psyche. In this, we are all *letzten Menschen*. Nietzsche wishes to eliminate truth as the standard for knowledge and “dispatch all metaphysical comforts to the devil” (Nietzsche 1967a, Self-Criticism §7).

This is not to say that Nietzsche is enthusiastically nihilistic, for he disdains those who are unconditionally anti-modern: “‘Everything is subjective,’ you say; but even this is interpretation” (Nietzsche 1968, §481). While it is correct that much of modernity is objectionable, it too possesses elements of truth. To reject the whole of the modern project, to be unqualifiedly or anti-modern, is just as adverse to philosophy, as being fully modern. Nietzsche is suspicious of historicism, since “it is a prejudice of the learned that *we now know better* than any age” (Nietzsche 1997a, §2). The possibility, and even the likelihood, that an objective truth exists Nietzsche leaves virtually untouched; he believes that such an animal exists. “As Nietzsche understands it,” Ted Sadler writes, “perspectivism does not rule out, but rather presupposes, an absolutistic conception of truth. Only when this is understood can the authentically philosophical radicalism of Nietzsche’s thought emerge, as opposed to the mere epistemological radicalism of postmodernist pluralism and other forms of relativism” (1995, p. 13). If an objective truth does exist, however, it cannot serve as the foundation for human activity, since we have no means of ascertaining its nature. Yet, far from dismissing truth, Nietzsche has high regard for it, perhaps even the highest: “In the end [truth] is a woman: she should not be violated” (Nietzsche 1966, §220).

Nevertheless, Nietzsche fails to comprehend why anyone, much less those professing a love of truth, would “prefer even a handful of ‘certainty’ to a whole carload of beautiful possibilities” (Nietzsche 1966, §10). Science limits and stunts the growth of man, both intellectually and spiritually:

A 'scientific' interpretation of the world, as you understand it, might therefore still be one of the *most stupid* of all possible interpretations of the world, meaning that it would be one of the poorest in meaning.... But an essentially mechanical world would be an essentially *meaningless* world. Assuming that one estimated the *value* of a piece of music according to how much of it could be counted, calculated, and expressed in formulas: how absurd would such a 'scientific' estimation of music be!" What would one have comprehended, understood, grasped of it? Nothing, really nothing of what is 'music' in it! (Nietzsche 1974, §373)

Science is unable to speak to the ends of human activity. At its best, science can provide only facts; it cannot speak to the values of a political community. Nietzsche defines science as "the transformation of nature into concepts for the purpose of mastering nature"; it "belongs under the rubric 'means'" (Nietzsche 1968, §610). Provided that it is placed in the hands of Nietzsche's new philosophers, science may be useful as a means, but as an end in itself, it is highly suspect.

As it now stands, faith in reason and science does not and can never provide a firm basis on which to ground political life. "What is science for *at all* if it has no time for culture?" Nietzsche asks. "What is the Whence, Whither, To what end of science if it is not to lead to culture? To lead to barbarism, perhaps?" (Nietzsche 1997b, §8). Yet, later he asks:

Why do we fear and hate a possible reversion to barbarism? Because it would make people unhappier than they are? Oh no! The barbarians of every age were *happier*....The reason is that our *drive to knowledge* has become too strong for us to be able to want happiness without knowledge or the happiness of a strong, firmly rooted delusion....Knowledge has in us been transformed into a passion which shrinks at no sacrifice and at bottom fears nothing but its own extinction....Perhaps mankind will even perish of this passion for knowledge!...if mankind does not perish of a *passion* it will perish of a *weakness*. (Nietzsche 1997a, §429)

In practice, the quest for truth has often come at the expense of man and society, which includes the moral standing of its practitioners: “In antiquity the dignity and recognition of science were diminished by the fact that even her most zealous disciples placed the striving for virtue first, and one felt that knowledge had received the highest praise when one celebrated it as the best means to virtue. It is something new in history that knowledge wants to be more than a mere means” (Nietzsche 1974, §123). If anything, Nietzsche claims, man will live better, both individually and collectively, by a change in what is called truth.

What is Life?

Although Nietzsche concludes that the will to power is the fundamental fact of nature, there are those who doubt the viability or the desirability of such a teaching. Some maintain (Rosen 1989, Berkowitz 1995) that deviating from a just and moral order would invariably result in instability or even chaos. Mankind, this view alleges, needs a firm set of values in order to live ethically. Destroying, or even undermining, such an order can have grave consequences. In response, Nietzsche argues the opposite: “it is not conflict of

opinions that has made history so violent but conflict of belief in opinions, that is to say conflict of convictions” (Nietzsche 1996, §630). The real chaos and the greatest danger lie in using an absolute (and therefore impossible) goal as the foundation for moral and political life. If man were focused instead on strength and intellectual honesty, the world would be more peaceful. “Three-quarters of all the evil done in the world happens out of timidity,” Nietzsche writes. “And this is above all a psychological problem” (Nietzsche 1997a, §538). It is acknowledging the limits on truth that makes men tolerant, peaceful, and happy. “Convictions are prisons” to be avoided at all costs (Nietzsche 1982a, §54).

It is these same convictions that have led man to pursue absolute truth. “The methodical search for truth,” Nietzsche posits, “is a product of those ages in which convictions were at war with one another. If the individual had not been concerned with *his* ‘truth,’ that is to say with his being in the right, there would have been no methods of inquiry at all” (Nietzsche 1996, §634). The search for truth easily becomes the *demand* for truth and the desire to *prove* the truth of our claims. “‘Truth’ is,” Nietzsche writes, “more fateful than error and ignorance, because it cuts off the forces that work toward enlightenment and knowledge” (Nietzsche 1968, §452). In this respect, “half-knowledge is more victorious than whole knowledge,” Nietzsche claims. “It understands things as being more simple than they are and this renders its opinions more easily intelligible and more convincing” (Nietzsche 1996, §578).

Appreciating the shortcomings of truth does not entail a thorough embrace of ignorance or a deliberate and exuberant return to the Dark Ages, the other objection to Nietzsche's philosophy. "Without this new passion — I mean the passion to know," Nietzsche declares, "science would still be promoted; after all, science has grown and matured without it until now" (Nietzsche 1974, §123).³ Recent advances in science have occurred despite, not because of, the modern perspective on reason and truth. "We all know how our age is typified by its pursuit of science," Nietzsche charges.

We know it because it is part of our life: and that precisely is the reason almost no one asks himself what the consequences of such an involvement with the science could be for culture, even supposing that the will and the capacity to promote culture were everywhere to hand. For the nature of scientific man ... contains a real paradox.... He seems to be permitted to squander his life on questions whose answer could at bottom be of consequence only to someone assured of an eternity. (Nietzsche 1997b, §8)

Reason is hostile to life not only in the answers that it finds, but in the sorts of questions it poses. In a sense, modernity is too concerned with method to concern itself with wisdom (Nietzsche 1968, §466). Rejecting truth as a standard does not mean that man's growth will be arrested.

There is a great difference, Nietzsche explains, between what is true and what is useful. "It is no more than a moral prejudice that truth is worth more than mere appearance; it is even the worst proved assumption there is in the world" (Nietzsche 1966, §34). "Man has been educated by his errors," says Nietzsche.

First he always saw himself incompletely; second, he endowed himself with fictitious attributes; third, he placed himself in a false order of rank in relation to animals and nature; fourth, he invented a new tables of goods and always accepted them for a time as eternal and unconditional: as a result of this, now one and now another human impulse and state held first place and was ennobled because it was esteemed so highly. If we removed the effects of these four errors, we should also remove humanity, humaneness, and 'human dignity.' (Nietzsche 1974, §115)

It might also be that falsehood is equally, or perhaps more, essential to life than is truth. There may be no fundamental difference between “the true, the truthful, and selfless” and “deception, selfishness, and lust”; the latter may be of even greater value (Nietzsche 1966, §2).

This is not to say that error cannot also cause great suffering, for man has been harmed by his errors, too: “Error is the most expensive luxury that man can permit himself; and if the error happens to be a physiological error, then it is perilous to life” (Nietzsche 1968, §453). The key question concerns the impact that knowledge has on life: “The falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment....The question is to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating” (Nietzsche 1966, §4). Life is often served greater by error than by truth. Truth, Nietzsche argues, is not good for its own sake; rather, it is only good to the extent that it serves life.

Replacing truth with life as a standard, however, presents its own set of difficulties. Most important, how is it to be measured? For this, Nietzsche looks to his will to power: “What

is good?” he asks. “Everything that heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself. What is bad? Everything that is born of weakness” (Nietzsche 1982a, § 2). With Nietzsche, happiness is “the feeling that power is *growing*, that resistance is overcome” (Nietzsche 1982a, §2). It is not a question of virtue but one of “fitness” (Nietzsche 1982a, §2). The will to power is the will to life. “If this should be an innovation as a theory — as a reality it is the *primordial fact* [*Ur-Faktum*] of all history: people ought to be honest with themselves at least that far” (Nietzsche 1966, §259).

Nietzsche uses the will to power to describe his sense of the good and the desirable. If we were to think of pleasure and pain, we would eventually be drawn to the will to power:

If the innermost essence of being is will to power, if pleasure is every increase of power, displeasure every feeling of not being able to resist or dominate; may we not then posit pleasure and displeasure as cardinal facts? Is will possible without these two oscillations of Yes and No? — But *who* feels pleasure? — But *who* wants power? — Absurd question, if the essence itself is power-will and consequently feelings of pleasure and displeasure! (Nietzsche 1968, §693)

Pain, to the extent that we can speak of such feeling, is not the frustration of the will; rather, “the feeling of pleasure lies precisely in the dissatisfaction of the will, in the fact that the will is never satisfied unless it has opponents and resistance” (Nietzsche 1968, §696). The strength of the will is predicated on the amount of strength gathered in opposition to it. Pleasure and growth are coeval and linked to the will to power.

True “growth” — an increase of the will’s power — is revealed in and determined by the ability to gain from experience. “Life itself,” Nietzsche writes

is *essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one’s own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation... if it is a living and not a dying body, [it] has to do to other bodies what the individuals within it refrain from doing to each other: it will have to be an incarnate will to power, it will strive to grow, spread, seize, become predominant — not from any morality or immorality but because it is *living* and because life simply *is* will to power. (Nietzsche 1966, §259)

The will to power is superior in that it not only accepts the contradictory, the ability to “appropriate the foreign,” it incorporates the contradictory into its system and appreciates it as such (Nietzsche 1966, §230). The will, and more importantly the growth of the will, is the source of Nietzsche’s perspectivism.

Even when tension occurs, it too can provide a great source of strength. The potential of perspective is related to the belief in the will to power and the growth process. For Nietzsche, “there is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective ‘knowing’; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our ‘concept’ of this thing, our ‘objectivity’ be” (Nietzsche 1989b, §3.12).

Yet there is another, seemingly opposite, drive that resembles this spirit. It is fundamentally the rejection of new experiences, a “deliberate exclusion, a shutting of one’s windows, an internal No to this or that, a refusal to let things approach, a kind of

state of defense against much that is knowable, a satisfaction with the dark, with the limiting horizon, a Yea and Amen to ignorance” (Nietzsche 1966, §230). Here, the will rejects the unknown; it is unable to withstand the tests of strength that experience requires. Nietzsche’s presents this spirit as a “stomach” that lacks “digestive capacity” (Nietzsche 1966, §230). The will’s capacity for growth does not mean that it always grows: the will is more likely to wither than thrive. Being healthy is not a state but a process through which strength is sought and achieved. Modern culture is diseased because it does not understand the conditions for its health, much less strive to attain those conditions. True strength and true growth of the will mean enduring the unfamiliar and exploring the dangerous.

Action, Nietzsche tells us, is primarily instinctive. The same is true of conscious thinking. Nietzsche notes: “just as sensations (and indeed many kinds of sensations) are to be recognized as ingredients of the will, so secondly, should thinking also: in every act of the will there is a ruling thought” (Nietzsche 1966, §19). Thinking too is an element of the will, an activity guided by the same physiological forces. To remove this activity from the will is to eliminate the will altogether. To conceive of thinking, or philosophy for that matter, without reference to the will, is to misconstrue the composition and the method of the will. Philosophy is also an instinct; consequently, “behind all logic and its seeming sovereignty of movement, too, there stand valuations or, more clearly, physiological demands for the preservation of a certain type of life” (Nietzsche 1966, §3).

Much of our “truth” derives from considerations of life and its preservation. The new philosophy is driven primarily by a concern for health.

This view of the will and growth is tied to the philosophy of the future. If Nietzsche intends to use life as the standard by which to order rank and judge truth, the two are connected through philosophy: the philosophers of the future are those best able to realize *life* as a value and philosophize in that spirit. Nietzsche’s new philosophy breaks from the moralistic tradition of philosophy and uses life as the standard for judgment.

Conclusion: Outside the Inside

There are, we must admit, two great difficulties concerning Nietzsche’s doctrine of the will. First, is life, or growth, an unambiguous standard? Nietzsche himself is aware of this difficulty:

One would require a position *outside* of life, and yet have to know it as well as one, as many, as all who have lived it, in order to be permitted even to touch the *problem* of the value of life: reasons enough to comprehend that this problem is for us an unapproachable problem. When we speak of values, we speak with the inspiration, with the way of looking at things, which is part of life: life itself forces us to posit values; life itself values through us when we posit values. (Nietzsche 1982c, ‘Morality’ §5)

The second question has to do with Nietzsche’s perspectivism. How can the will to power be, or even serve, as the foundation for life, given what Nietzsche says of universal truth? How does it comport with his post-metaphysical philosophy? Nietzsche’s revision of the

scientific method is related to his faith in the value of perspective and the recognition of the will as a thesis to be tested. “The question is in the end,” Nietzsche declares, “whether we really recognize the will as *efficient*, whether we believe in the causality of the will: if we do — and at bottom our faith in this is nothing less than our faith in causality itself — then we have to make the experiment of positing the causality of the will hypothetically as the only one” (Nietzsche 1966, §36). While Nietzsche is skeptical of cause and effect as a science, he does leave faith in causation untouched, for “to eliminate the will altogether, to suspend each and every affect, supposing we were capable of this — what would that mean but to *castrate* the intellect?” (Nietzsche 1989b, §3.12). Viewing the will as the principal cause is an experiment that must be conducted. Short of this, philosophy becomes ideology and faith becomes nihilism. “In short,” Nietzsche concludes, “one has to *risk the hypothesis* whether will does not affect will wherever ‘effects’ are recognized — and whether all mechanical occurrences are not, insofar as a force is active in them, will force, effects of will” (Nietzsche 1966, §36; emphasis added). The will as causation is an experiment marking a new philosopher.

Although his defense of life as the standard for truth and philosophy emerges from his perspectivism, Nietzsche claims superiority for his approach and defends it as such:

Suppose, finally, we succeeded in explaining our entire instinctive life as the development and ramification of *one* basic form of the will — namely, of the will to power, as *my* proposition has it; suppose all organic functions could be traced back to this will to power and one could also find in it the solution of the problem of procreation and nourishment — it is *one* problem — then one would have gained the right to determine *all* efficient force univocally as — *will to power*. The world viewed from inside, the world defined and determined according to its ‘intelligible character’ — it would be ‘will to power’ and nothing else. (Nietzsche 1966, §36)

“Suppose,” Nietzsche warns — twice. Although the will to power is presented here as a thesis to be tested, it is one that Nietzsche endorses as the “fundamental fact of nature.”⁴ It is *true* because it serves life better than any other alternative. Viewing the whole of nature as the will to power is the surest means to the health and growth of individuals and, through individuals, culture.

If we are to truly know the will, we must first admit what we do not know of it. Williams’ conclusion seems to negate her premise that Nietzsche presents the will to power in various forms throughout his writings. If the will to power can only be appreciated in its entirety through his perspectivism, then it makes little, or even no, difference how the development of the will to power is understood, only that we take every perspective possible, Nietzsche’s included. What is more, her suggestion that “viewing the will to power as a consciously chosen perspective from which to interpret the world eliminates any need to argue about whether the will to power is metaphysical, cosmological, or ontological” (2001, p. 130) clearly runs afoul of Nietzsche’s perspectivism, and is in fact the opposite of Nietzsche’s stated desire.

The will to power appears in nature as a source of order, without presupposing nature itself as an ordering principle. Furthermore, it is not metaphysical because Nietzsche presents the will to power as a claim on truth, not as self-evidently true or absolute. Where Plato brings the will to its knees, Nietzsche raises it to the heavens. The will to power may begin as perspective, but it ends as ontology.

NOTES

¹ For a discussion on the will to power as a deceptive or rhetorical device, see Charles E. Scott, "The Mask of Nietzsche's Self-Overcoming," *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: Essays Pro and Contra*, Clayton Koelb, ed. (Nietzsche 1982a, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 217-229. Scott concludes that the notion of will to power sets aside solutions in favor of a series of more robust questions. Scott claims, "in Nietzsche's mask of self-overcoming, question dominates solution and sets in motion a distinctive way of thinking that forms in the self-overcoming movements" (p. 229).

² Richard Rorty calls Plato a "power freak" and credits him with the emergence of pragmatism: "We have become pragmatists. But we only took the path that leads to pragmatism because Plato told us that we had to take evidence and certainty, and therefore skepticism, seriously." "Heidegger, Contingency, and Pragmatism," *Essays on Heidegger and others: Philosophical papers, vol. 2* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 30-31. Furthermore, Rorty interprets Heidegger to mean that a self-conscious pragmatism is preferable to the "repressed and self-deceived" alternative provided by Plato (p. 32). For Rorty, pragmatism is really the best outcome of the Platonic tradition.

³ "Knowledge grows as and when the gods are ceasing to be good; it springs from the egoism of individuals seeking their fortunes (for example, through navigation); it is elaborated as a variety of aristocratic amusement; and finally the urge to know arises in those who, becoming tired of the ebb and flow of popular opinion, want something solid to cling to." Keith M. May, *Nietzsche on the Struggle between Knowledge and Wisdom* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1993), p. xi.

⁴ Daniel Conway argues that Nietzsche fails to prove the hypothesis of the will to power: "The world viewed 'from inside' thus remains a project rather than an accomplishment." "Revisiting the Will to Power: Active Nihilism and the Project of Trans-human Philosophy," *Nililism Now! Monsters of Energy*, Keith Ansell-Pearson and Diane Morgan, eds. (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p. 136.

REFERENCES

Berkowitz, Peter (1995) *Nietzsche: Ethics of an Immoralist*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Conway, Daniel (2000) "Revisiting the Will to Power: Active Nihilism and the Project of Trans-human Philosophy," *Nihilism Now! Monsters of Energy*, eds. Keith Ansell-Pearson and Diane Morgan, eds. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

Magee, Bryan (1983) *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*. New York: Oxford University Press.

May, Keith M. (1993) *Nietzsche on the Struggle between Knowledge and Wisdom*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1966) *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books.

_____ (1967a) *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House.

_____ (1967b) *The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House.

_____ (1968) *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books.

_____ (1974) *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books.

_____ (1982a) "The Antichrist," *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin Books

_____ (1982b) "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin Books

_____ (1982c) "Twilight of the Idols," *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin Books

_____ (1989a) *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books.

_____ (1989b) *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books.

_____ (1996) *Human, All too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Cambridge, 1996.

_____ (1997a) *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Cambridge University Press.

____ (1997b) "David Strauss, the confessor and the writer," *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Cambridge University Press.

____ (1998) *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. Marianne Cowan. Washington, D.C.: Regenery Publishing, Inc.

Rorty, Richard (1991) "Heidegger, Contingency, and Pragmatism," *Essays on Heidegger and others, Philosophical papers, vol. 2*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Rosen, Stanley (1989) *The Ancients and the Moderns: Rethinking Modernity*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Sadler, Ted (1995) *Nietzsche: Truth and Redemption*. Atlantic Highlands: The Athlone Press.

Schopenhauer, Arthur (1995) *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. Jill Berman. Rushland: Charles E. Tuttle Co.

Scott, Charles E. (1990) "The Mask of Nietzsche's Self-Overcoming," *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: Essays Pro and Contra*, ed. Clayton Koelb. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Williams, Linda L. (2001) *Nietzsche's Mirror: The World as Will to Power*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Copyright © 2004 Minerva

All rights are reserved, but fair and good faith use with full attribution may be made of this work for educational or scholarly purposes.

Steven Michels is an assistant professor of political science at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut.

Email: MICHELSS@SACREDHEART.EDU